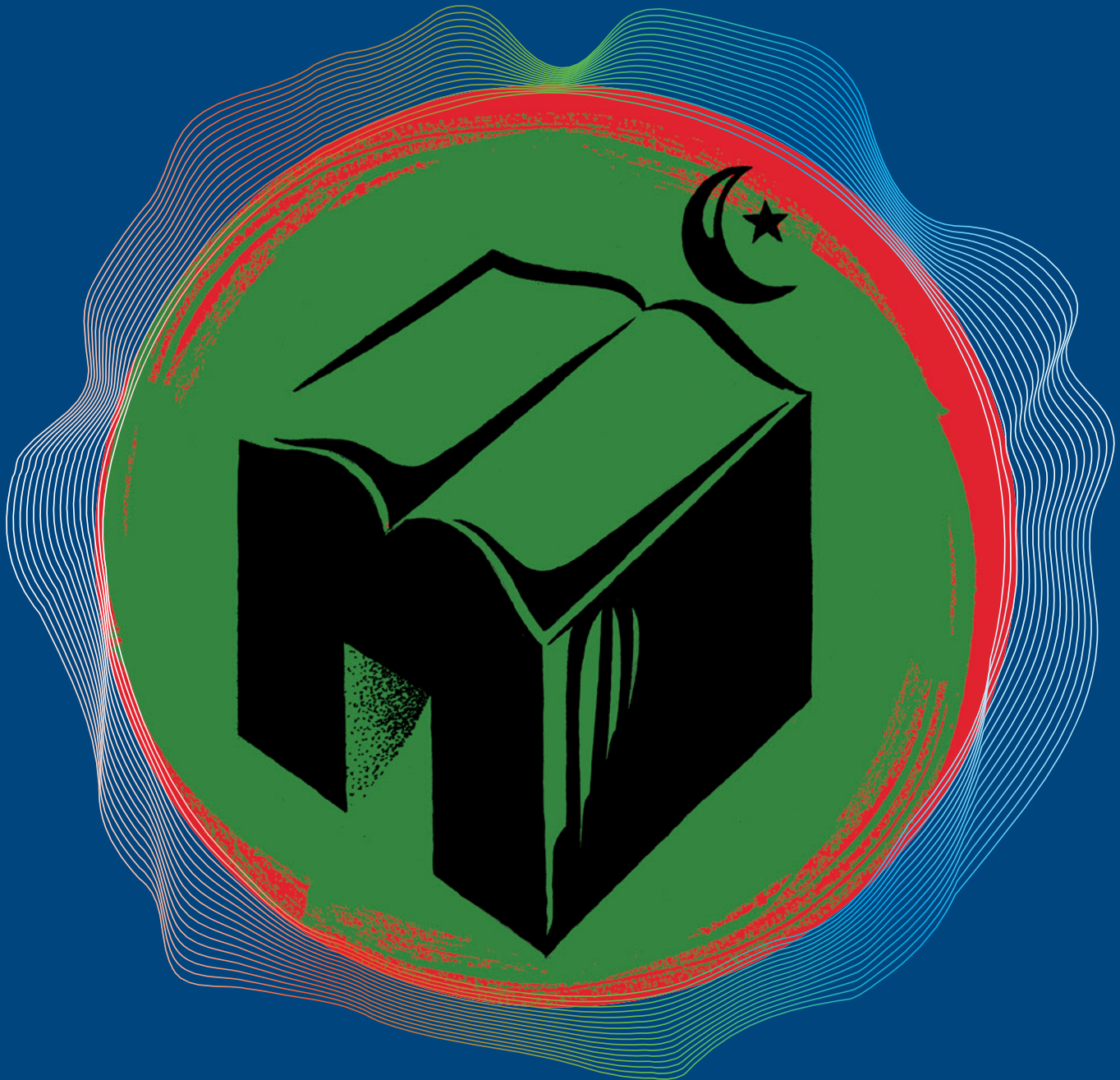




LEVEL
YOUTH POLICY PROGRAM



POLICY BRIEF

Creating Spaces for Muslim Youth in the City

NUR AZLAN SHAH BIN NUR SAIDY (AZLAN NUR SAIDY)

The LEVEL Youth Policy Program takes place on the traditional and unceded territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sk̓wx̓wú7mesh (Squamish) & sə́ilwətaʔ (Tsleil-Waututh) Coast Salish peoples.

GRAPHIC DESIGN

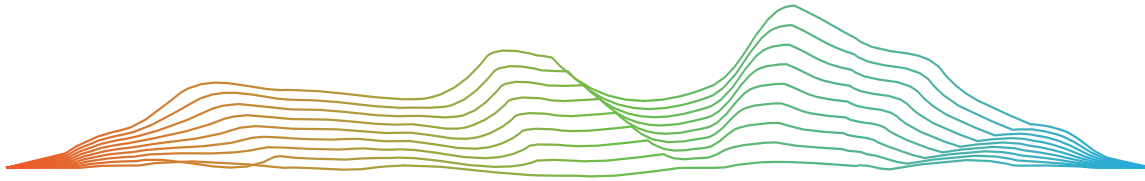
And Also Too

COVER ILLUSTRATION

Yaimel Lopez

Contents

- 3 About the LEVEL Initiative**
- 4 Biography**
- 4 Acknowledgements**
- 5 Executive Summary**
- 6 Problem Definition and Background**
- 10 Policy Options**
- 14 Conclusion**



About the LEVEL Initiative

LEVEL is a youth engagement initiative of Vancouver Foundation that aims to address racial inequity. We do this by investing in the leadership capacity of Indigenous, racialized, immigrant, and refugee youth to create more opportunities throughout the non-profit and charitable sector.

Despite being the fastest-growing youth populations in British Columbia, Indigenous, immigrant, and refugee youth don't have the same opportunities as other young people. Race continues to be a factor that hinders their ability to have a say in decisions that impact their lives.

LEVEL empowers these youth by building their capacity to challenge and change those systems that hinder their ability to build a more just world.

LEVEL consists of three pillars of work to advance racial equity

1. LEVEL Youth Policy Program
2. LEVEL Youth Organizing
3. LEVEL Youth Granting

About the LEVEL Youth Policy Program (LEVEL YPP)

The LEVEL Youth Policy Program (LEVEL YPP) brings together young people between the ages of 19 and 29 from across British Columbia who identify as being Indigenous or racialized immigrants or refugees. Indigenous

and racialized Newcomer youth are disproportionately impacted by certain public policies but are rarely included in the development and implementation of public policy process. The LEVEL YPP aims to provide these youth with equitable training and leadership opportunities to better navigate the public policy landscape, and to develop new tools and skills to influence, shape, and advocate for policy changes that are relevant in their own communities. Having young people directly involved in shaping policies that impact their lives is essential to creating systemic, meaningful change. The LEVEL YPP's training is grounded from and within Indigenous peoples' worldviews, which the program acknowledges, could vary from person-to-person or nation-to-nation. Indigenous worldviews place a large emphasis on connections to the land. This perspective views the land as sacred; where everything and everyone is related and connected; where the quality of the relationships formed are key in life; where what matters is the success and well-being of the community, and where there can be many truths as they are based on individual lived experiences.¹ As such, an important premise of this training is to centre and place a particular focus on the fact that the work that has gone into developing this training, as well as the training itself, has taken and will take place on unceded (never given away/stolen) territories of the hən̓q̓'əmin 'əḿ-speaking Musqueam peoples, of the Halkomelem-speaking Tsleil-Waututh peoples, and of the sníchimspeaking Skwx_wú7mesh (Squamish) peoples.

1. <https://www.ictinc.ca/blog/indigenous-peoples-worldviews-vs-western-worldviews>

Biography

Nur Azlan Shah Bin Nur Saidy (Azlan Nur Saidy)



I am an uninvited guest and settler living on the unceded territories of the Musqueam, Tsleil-Waututh, Squamish, and Kwikwetlem First Nations. I am Muslim Malay cis-man born in Temasek/ Singapura (Singapore), which is the territory (Negara Selat) of the Orang Laut peoples. My family came to these lands when I was a year old, and I became a Canadian citizen at the age of 10.

I am currently pursuing my Masters in Community and Regional Planning at the University of British Columbia (UBC). I am driven by a curiosity of the intersection between urban planning, health, and sustainability and I am passionate about creating inclusive and engaged communities. I am also a research coordinator at Simon Fraser University's (SFU) CoHeaRT lab, where I assist in the study of how socio-economic factors and the urban-built environment can affect population health. In my spare time, I enjoy hiking, cycling, and dragon boating.

Acknowledgements

This policy brief was written on the unceded and occupied territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and sə́l ilwətaʔ (Tsleil-Waututh) peoples. I am grateful to be on this land that has been stewarded by these Nations since time immemorial. I am also grateful for all the teachings and learnings that the LEVEL program, staff, faculty, and participants have

shared with me. I am especially thankful for Alejandra López Bravo, Marcus Reid, Aida Mwanzia, Nathalie Lozano-Neira, Kevin Huang, Sharmarke Dubow, Aslam Bulbulia, Tariq Malik, and Matraca Ashcroft for helping me realize my work.

Terima kasih.

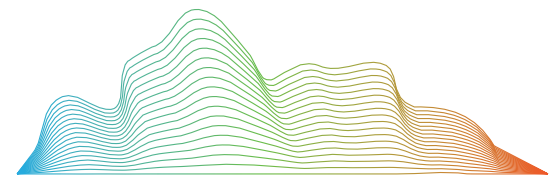
Executive Summary

The City of Vancouver was established through the displacement, erasure, and exclusion of Black, Indigenous, Mixed-Race, and People of Colour (BIMPOC) communities.

This displacement, erasure, and exclusion based on race had the secondary effect of excluding racialized spiritual beliefs and religious traditions. This erased spiritual spaces that existed pre-colonization and prevented non-Christian spiritual traditions from having space in the City of Vancouver post-colonization. At the same time, land and space were made available to European settlers and their spiritual beliefs. Churches were able to gain access to valuable land in the core of the Metro Vancouver region, and in the most valuable properties in the city, such as Downtown Vancouver. This has created a spatial inequity in which spaces for other spiritual/religious communities are mainly located on the margins, which has led to a less-inclusive city for racialized religions. The focus of this policy brief will be to examine the exclusion of the Muslim community in the City of Vancouver. This exclusion has led to a lack of spaces for Muslim youth to live in accordance with their cultures and belief systems.

Due to its historic complicity in the dispossession and exclusion of racialized communities and spiritual beliefs, the City of Vancouver has a responsibility to provide redress and repara-

tions for these communities. The lack of spaces in the City of Vancouver for Muslims, and Muslim youth in particular, prevents them from fully engaging in the cultural life, economy, and conversations happening in the city. In order to address this issue, the City of Vancouver must support the creation of spaces for the Muslim community in general, with a specific focus on Muslim youth. The City of Vancouver must also ensure that the spiritual needs of all communities are met, not only communities that have privileged from colonization. Supporting the spiritual needs of all communities should be based on an equity framework that acknowledges the history of erasure and exclusion of BIMPOC peoples.



The City of Vancouver must ensure that the spiritual needs of all communities are met, not only communities that have privileged from colonization.



Problem Definition and Background

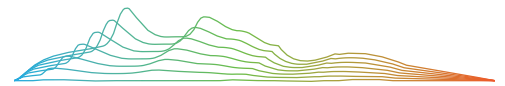
For the purpose of this policy brief, a Muslim is anyone who self-identifies as a Muslim. This includes both practicing, non-practicing, secular/cultural, Queer Muslims, and it is inclusive of all sects of Islam. The Muslim community in Metro Vancouver is diverse and includes people from a range of ethnicities and cultures including Black, South-East Asian, South Asian, and Middle Eastern communities (among others). Within a “Western” context, Muslims are viewed through an orientalist and colonial lens that pigeonholes Muslim-identifying people into an identity that reduces them to certain mannerisms, customs, buildings, and traditions (1). This lens on Muslim identity severely limits the types of policies and actions that can be made to benefit the Muslim community. It is important to note that Muslims and Muslim identity are more than just the Mosque (as a space and as an institution) and a set of spiritual beliefs. In fact, not all Muslims attend the Mosque on a regular basis (2). To engage Muslims in decisions that affect them means to engage with this diversity, by avoiding the essentialization of the Muslim identity.

The Muslim community makes up 3.2% of the total population (2.5 million) in Metro Vancouver (3) and it is estimated that the population of Muslims in Canada will nearly triple over a period of 20 years (4). The Muslim population in Canada is young (4), and although comprised of various ethnicities, is racialized (overwhelmingly BIMPOC and immigrant). The City of Vancouver hasn’t always been

welcoming of Muslim-identified peoples and this policy brief will argue that the City still has a long way to go if it wants to be inclusive of the Muslim community.

Prior to the arrival of other BIMPOC belief systems, Indigenous communities and their spiritual beliefs were seen as threats to the Anglo-Christian settler hegemony. European settlers and their associated beliefs were privileged and were the beneficiaries of White supremacy and colonization. This can be seen in the legacy of residential schools in British Columbia (BC) and in Canada. Indigenous communities, ways of being, and spiritual beliefs were the targets of erasure and children were required to practice Christianity. The last residential school in BC closed in 1984 (5). Through forced evictions of Indigenous communities and villages, land was made available for European settlers, and as a result Christian churches had access to prime real estate in places like the downtown peninsula. In effect, this privileging of European settler communities to the detriment of other communities resulted in the expulsion of BIMPOC associated spiritual beliefs with Christianity as its replacement.

Once White Christianity was given a foothold in Vancouver, other religions and spiritual beliefs were prevented from being a part of the



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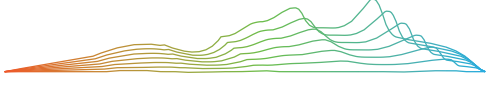
Sikh people on board the Komagata Maru, 1914. Photo by the Canadian Photo Company.

cultural fabric. As Canadians, we tend to think that segregation and apartheid are things that happen elsewhere — in the United States, or in South Africa for example. However, according to Dr. Henry Yu, Canada had a system of racial apartheid similar to other British settler colonies such as Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa (6). The City of Vancouver was no exception. In fact, many cities around the Lower Mainland had Land Title Covenants, which barred BIMPOC communities and individuals from buying homes in the city (7). These laws excluded communities based on race, but it also had the secondary effect of excluding associated racialized religions. Even though there might not have been direct policies that targeted the Muslim community, Islam, as a racialized religion, is mostly embodied in Black and Brown bodies. Excluding these bodies also means indirectly excluding Muslims. Therefore, a secondary effect of excluding racialized communities is also excluding their spiritual belief systems and ways of being. As a result, segregation and land titles served to keep the City of Vancouver not only White but also Christian.

The combination of ongoing colonization of Indigenous communities, and the exclusion of BIMPOC communities and their belief systems, provided the inhospitable backdrop for the *Komagata Maru* Incident of 1914. The *Komagata Maru* was the name of a Japanese ship that carried 376 immigrants from (then British) India to Vancouver in May 1914. An important note is that the passengers of the *Komagata*

Maru included 337 Sikhs, 27 Muslims, and 12 Hindus (8). These passengers were not only denied entry due to racist and colonial laws, but were also refused due process, and even food and water before they were forced to leave (8). This incident is commonly seen as an exclusion based on race, but the passengers were not only South Asian, they were also Sikh, Muslim, and Hindu. Excluding the passengers of *Komagata Maru* also meant excluding these religions.

Even while facing exclusion through incidents like the *Komagata Maru*, the South Asian community that did manage to find themselves living in Vancouver found ways to connect and create community. One of the ways they did this was through religious spaces, which doubled as places of activism, solidarity, and organizing. Lynne Sorrel Marks mentions that the Sikh community “founded temples or Gurdwara in Vancouver, Victoria, and nearby towns. Johnston notes that the BC Sikh temples served all South Asians, including Muslims and



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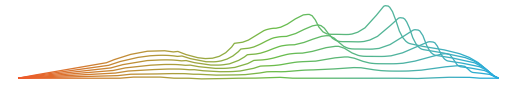
Hindus, providing meeting places and cultural and social resources in a foreign and racist society...Whites did not want to let people build Gurdwaras because they feared that South Asians would congregate there and make plans and improve their condition. Indeed, Gurdwaras did provide meeting places for South Asians who struggled against both racist exclusion in Canada and British Imperialism in India” (9). This is an example of how White supremacists and colonial forces recognized the role of religion as a method of organizing and solidarity for oppressed communities. Seeing BIMPOC religious spaces as a threat to dominant power structures provided the impetus for the exclusion of these spaces from the city.

Fast forward to today, and BIMPOC and Muslim communities still face systemic discrimination and barriers in the City of Vancouver, BC, and Canada as a whole. Hate crimes against Muslims rose across Canada after September 11th, 2001, and Muslim communities across the country have faced distrust, violence, intimidation, and de-humanization from other Canadians since (10). The Conservative campaign in 2015 sought to exploit tensions between the Muslim community and wider Canadian society, which was correlated with a 60% increase in hate crimes against Muslims in 2015 (11). In 2017, six members of the Muslim community were murdered in their own Mosque and five were wounded by a hate-fuelled act of violence (12). My own Mosque in Surrey, BC, was the target of intimidation by White supremacists in 2017 (13).

These historical precedents have contributed to the current lack of spaces for Muslims in

the City of Vancouver and most Muslim spaces are located outside of the city proper (14). Of the spaces that do exist in the City of Vancouver, many are insufficient in size (some are in the back of a Muslim-owned grocery store), only available for the obligatory Friday prayers, and/or face struggles with rent in an expensive city. Even when Muslims get together to create space for themselves, they are disproportionately surveilled and policed by Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), and the police (15). Echoing the past, whenever Muslims gather and organize to “better” their condition, it is seen as a threat to the state and its security.

In addition, there are Muslim identities and communities that face barriers that are compounded by other marginalizations (both within and outside of their communities). When it comes to creating spaces for Muslim communities, it is easy to think that this is only limited to Mosques. However, although Mosques are an important institution for many Muslim communities, Mosques do not serve everyone. Although this policy document will briefly focus on Muslim youth, it is important to note that there are other Muslim identities who are also facing multiple marginalizations. Laura Kapinga has found that local Mosques in Metro Vancouver have been failing to provide spaces for Muslim youth to explore and negotiate their identities as young Muslims. She has also found that youth do not sit idle and have actually been proactive in creating alternative spaces for themselves (16). This shows that Muslim youth are seeking out

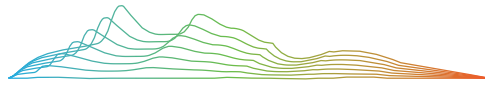


Whenever Muslims gather and organize to “better” their condition, it is seen as a threat to the state and its security.



spaces that provide them opportunities for more self-determination. However, many young Muslim initiatives do not have a physical space and often meet in public spaces where youth have reported feeling “gazed at” and out of place (16). This calls for more imaginative solutions than just providing more youth spaces at the Mosque, and requires engagement inclusive of, but not limited by, the Mosque setting.

Due to this history of segregation, exclusion, and racism, the City of Vancouver has a responsibility to support spaces for Muslim communities. It must recognize the diversity of the Muslim experiences to ensure that marginalized groups within the Muslim community do not get left behind. Muslim youth are one example of a Muslim demographic that is caught in-between a lack of spaces in the city and existing mosques. Other groups include Queer Muslims, women, and Black Muslims (among others). If the City of Vancouver wants to live up to its potential as an inclusive city, then it must not only address the aforementioned historic injustices, but also provide redress, and reparations to affected communities. Some proposals for such redress will be outlined in the next section.



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Policy Options

RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms states that in Canada everyone has the fundamental freedom of conscience and religion (17).

Although freedom of religion is enshrined in the Charter, municipalities across Canada often fail to engage with and include religious communities in their visions for the future. This is a result of a history of secularization in Western European-descended societies. The Supreme Court of Canada has stated that governments must maintain neutrality when it comes to religion and that:

“... state neutrality is assured when the state neither favours nor hinders any particular religious belief, that is, when it shows respect for all postures towards religion, including that of having no religious beliefs whatsoever, while taking into account the competing constitutional rights of the individuals affected” (18).

Even within this definition of secularism, there is still much room for interpretation. As seen in Quebec's Bill 21, some governments in Canada take this definition in the direction of removing religion and spirituality from the public sphere. However, this effectively decreases inclusivity and constructs barriers to already marginalized groups to participate in public life (19).

So if the solution is to not remove religion and spirituality from public life, what are some other options for operating within the Supreme Court of Canada's definition of state neutrality? Iain Benson (20) posits that there are four main orientations that secular states can have towards religion:

1. **neutral secular:** The state is expressly non-religious and must not support religion in any way;
2. **positive secular:** The state does not affirm religious beliefs of any particular religion but may create conditions favourable to religions generally;
3. **negative secular:** The state is not competent in matters involving religion but must not act so as to inhibit religious manifestations that do not threaten the common good;
4. **inclusive secular:** The state must not be run or directed by a particular religion but must act so as to include the widest involvement of different faith groups, including non-religious.

Based on these orientations, state policies like those of Quebec's Bill 21 might fall under the first definition, the neutral secular. At present, it could be argued that the City of Vancouver falls under the third definition, the negative secular. For example, the City of Vancouver acknowledges that “Vancouver is a mix of different religions, ethnicities, and cultural groups from all over the world and Canada's Indigenous communities. Staff and Council value this diversity, because it is a



source of the City's strength, vitality, and prosperity" (21). The City also recognizes the freedom of speech and right to assembly of all religious groups, by providing them with a free permit for public meetings (22). This shows that the City does not "inhibit religious manifestations that do not threaten the common good," as per Iain Benson's definition of the negative secular (20). However, the City does not go out of its way to engage religious communities in decisions that affect them. This runs counter to the Healthy City Strategy goal of creating a "safe city in which residents feel safe and included" (23). In order to create a sense of inclusion, all residents must feel like they are included in decision-making in their communities. This policy brief argues for the move away from a negative secular orientation, and a move towards the inclusive secular orientation by the City of Vancouver to include the "widest involvement of different faith groups" (20).

The seeds of this movement can already be seen in the City of Vancouver's Culture Shift Strategy (24). The City of Vancouver acknowledges that culture "is the lifeblood of cities. Without a vibrant cultural life, cities fail to thrive" (24). According to the Cultural Shift Strategy engagement findings: "Culture encompasses communities' identities, values, beliefs, aspirations, attitudes, knowledge, memories, and heritage, as well as how those aspects are expressed through stories, artistic and cultural practices, customs, language, food, environmental stewardship, dress and adornment, design and architecture, rituals, and religion" (24). Although the City acknowledges that culture is more than just the arts and music (in the Western context), and includes cultural practices, customs, rituals and religion, spirituality and religion is not mentioned anywhere else in the Cultural Shift plan. Often, BIMPOC spiritual communities need to translate their spiritual practices to fit within an "arts and culture" framework. For example, an evening of Quran recitation needs to be explained as a music event. This effectively limits what cultural practices are allowed and forces these practices to assimilate to a colonial definition of culture.

By not addressing spirituality and/or religion, the City risks supporting the status quo, in which the needs of religious/spiritual communities that were supported by colonization are met, while the needs of excluded communities are not. Due to the role of the State in the systematic erasure of Indigenous spiritualities, and the exclusion of racialized religions, the City of Vancouver has a responsibility to provide redress and reparations for these spiritual/religious communities. This is in accordance with strategic direction in the Culture Shift Strategy, which addresses cultural equity and accessibility. Specifically, Goal #3 of this strategic direction is aimed at prioritizing intangible cultural heritage and promoting cultural redress (24). It also aligns with Goal #3 of the City of Vancouver Corporate Plan 2020, in which the city aims to increase focus on diversity, equity and social issues/opportunities (25).



Although the City acknowledges that culture is more than just the arts and music (in the Western context), and includes cultural practices, customs, rituals and religion, spirituality and religion is not mentioned anywhere else in the Cultural Shift plan. Often, BIMPOC spiritual communities need to translate their spiritual practices to fit within an "arts and culture" framework.



There is already a precedent for secular institutions including spiritual needs of the community. Many universities across Canada accept the importance of meeting the spiritual needs of their students and have dedicated multi-faith spaces. One such example is the University of British Columbia (26).

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The City of Vancouver must support the creation of spaces for the Muslim community in general, with a specific focus on Muslim youth.
2. The City of Vancouver must ensure that the spiritual needs of all communities are met, based on an equity framework that acknowledges the history of erasure and exclusion of BIMPOC spiritual/religious communities.

Vision

The City of Vancouver is a city where Muslim youth have easy access to create spaces to explore their identity and what it means to be Muslim in Canada. Having spaces that meet their cultural and spiritual needs in Metro Vancouver's core city allows the Muslims and Muslim youth more opportunities for participation in the cultural life, economy, and innovation happening in the city. They bring along with them Islamic cosmologies and ways of being that provide new insights, strategies and approaches to dealing with problems such as climate change, inequality *etc.* In addition, Muslim-identified people feel safe walking and existing in the city without the fear of being attacked for the way they look, called a terrorist, or being arrested for looking suspicious. The City of Vancouver is renowned internationally for:

- A diverse Muslim population representing multiple Muslim sects with roots from all over the world;
- Muslim hip-hop festivals;
- A Muslim rapper who represents his city and his communities;
- A Hijabi fashion line that could only have come from the West Coast;
- Calligraffiti that adorns the walls of buildings across the city;
- Muslim youth groups that host nature walks to engage the Muslim community in sustainability action;
- Being a centre of intercultural and interreligious dialogue;
- Eid bazaars where people from across Metro Vancouver can sample food, clothing, and customs from across different Muslim communities and cultures;
- A decolonial Muslim summer school that seeks to explore what it means to be a Muslim settler on unceded Musqueam, Tsleil-Waututh and Squamish Territories;
- A Muslim community that is building relationships with the First Nations to which these lands belong;
- And more!



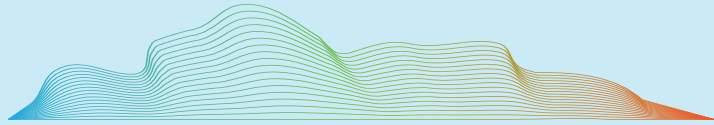
NEXT STEPS

1. **Recognize that the City of Vancouver is complicit** in the exclusion and erasure of BIMPOC religious communities.
2. **Recognize that the City of Vancouver is not practicing** inclusive secularism.
3. **Ensure that the spiritual needs of every community is met** in the City of Vancouver. Include this as a priority and goal in the Culture Shift strategy, Vancouver's upcoming city-wide plan as well as Equity Strategy.
4. **Engage the Muslim community** to find out what their needs are and how to better address them.
5. **Increasing Muslim youth representation** in key decisions that affect them.
6. **Set up a youth advisory committee** for religious BIMPOC youth.
7. **Secure funding from Arts, Culture, and Community Services (ACCS) for Muslim youth spaces.** These do not need to be solely dedicated to Muslim youth and can serve as spaces for other BIMPOC religious communities needing space in the city. These spaces can provide opportunities for Muslim youth to:
 - a) Co-create solutions to issues that they face;
 - b) Build relationships with one another and with other BIMPOC religious communities;
 - c) A space to pray with readily available wudhu (ablution) spaces. Include infrastructure for indoor smudging (for Indigenous communities) and/or the needs of other spiritual practices if space is to be shared;
 - d) Facilitate dialogues, lectures, classes, workshops, and seminars;
 - e) Host an open mic or gallery night for upcoming Muslim artists.
8. Since the Muslim community is disproportionately surveilled and policed by various state apparatus, **consider redirecting funds from police departments toward providing cultural spaces for marginalized, over-policed, and surveilled communities.**



Having spaces that meet their cultural and spiritual needs in Metro Vancouver's core city allows the Muslims and Muslim youth more opportunities for participation in the cultural life, economy, and innovation happening in the city.

Conclusion




The City of Vancouver is at a crossroads. For the first time in its history, it is in the process of creating a city-wide plan and an equity strategy. The City has a chance to take a first step in providing redress and reparations to address the effects of historical exclusion of BIMPOC communities and spiritual beliefs. It can do this by making sure that spiritual needs are addressed in both the city-wide plan and the equity strategy and by funding more spaces for Muslim youth. If it fails to do so, Muslim youth, and other racialized religious communities, will continue to be marginalized and face barriers to participating in civic life. On the other hand, if the City takes up the challenge of addressing these historic inequities, it will not only help Vancouver on its way to becoming an inclusive city, but it will also add to the cultural vitality and sense of place that reflects an increasing diversity of public life. In a world where differences in culture, religion, and other components of identity can lead to conflict and strife, Vancouver can stand out as a city where different cultures and religions support one another to achieve the full expression of themselves. This policy brief urges the City of Vancouver to seriously consider its complicity in maintaining a status quo that was established by colonizers and White supremacists. Once it does so, the City of Vancouver can start to move toward a future where multiple cosmologies, ways of being and knowledge can lead to the City being better equipped to address challenges that lie ahead.

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The lack of spaces in the City for Muslims, and Muslim youth in particular, prevents them from fully engaging in the cultural life, economy and conversations happening in the city.

Vancouver Foundation is Community Inspired. We are a community foundation that connects the generosity of donors with the energy, ideas, and time of people in the community. Together, we've been making meaningful and lasting impacts in neighborhoods and communities since 1943. We work with individuals, corporations, and charitable agencies to create permanent endowment funds and then use the income to support thousands of charities. We recognize that communities are complex and that collaboration between multiple stakeholders is needed to help everyone thrive and evolve. Vancouver Foundation brings together donors, non-profits and charities, government, media and academic institutions, local leaders, and passionate individuals to build meaningful and lasting change in the province of British Columbia. We see young people, their voices and experiences as part of that vision to building meaningful change.

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